

[0:00:41]

Riggenbach: Today is February 6, 2022. My name is Amanda Riggenbach, and I am the project manager for the Tumultuous 2020 oral history project at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. I'm currently with Gabriela Ramirez in her Chicago, Illinois home. We're going to be talking about her experiences as a remote worker and home schooler at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic.

[0:00:25] Thank you so much, Gabby, for having me here with you.

Ramirez: I appreciate the opportunity.

Riggenbach: Your home is so beautiful. I always forget that Chicago – I always think tiny apartments, but this is lovely here.

Ramirez: Thank you, thank you.

Riggenbach: And so we will start kind of with the basics. When and where were you born? And you don't have to give the exact date, but just the year.

Ramirez: Okay. I was born 1984, February 20, and I was born here in Chicago.

Riggenbach: Were you raised here as well?

[0:00:57]

Ramirez: I was raised here as well, yes. My parents are both of Mexican descent, and they came here in the early 1970s. So we've been here – you know, I was actually the first born here in the U.S., and I have two older siblings that were born in Mexico.

Riggenbach: And I think in our pre-interview, you talked about how your whole life, you and your older sister kind of worked as translators for your parents?

Ramirez: Yes, that is very correct.

[0:01:28]

So early on, with parents that did not understand the language and very little education in Mexico and none here in the U.S., we were the ones that were the liaisons between any type of major – major and minor actually – thing that they had to do, whether it was anything that had to do with the government, anything that had to do with a simple translate in the supermarket.

[0:02:01]

We had to be the ones to interpret that for our parents. And early on, I had to take on the role because my sister, once she was in college, she wasn't very available for my parents to take that initiative. So I had to do it. And I'm like, you know, I'm barely in second grade thinking, you know, I don't know these big words yet. It was intimidating, but yeah, I had to do that.

Ramirez_Gab

[0:02:30]

Riggenbach: And that was before the internet was very prevalent, so you couldn't look stuff up.

Ramirez: Exactly, yes. And then I was passed on to let's say another person who didn't understand the language and, you know, my mom or my dad would be like, hey, can you interpret for them? And I'm like, okay. I'm like, I'm already struggling with you, and I feel like, what if I say something wrong, and I interpret something differently?

[0:02:56] And I just took it and ran. I did the best I could.

Riggenbach: You mentioned that when you were in second grade, your sister was in college. So that's quite an age gap.

Ramirez: Yes, we are ten years apart, and by the time she was in high school, I was barely starting grammar school. So there was that huge gap, but she did make the time a lot to spend with me.

[0:03:25] And I would say I was pushed upon her too, because she was already dating, and so my dad was more comfortable sending me when you're the little – oh, you know, here, chaperone. So yeah, we do have quite an age gap. But it works out great, because now we actually – about six years ago, we were working together. I was struggling to find a job, and there was an opening in her company.

[0:04:00] And we were actually working together, so I was like, oh yeah. It was a bonding experience as well, as I missed those opportunities early on sometimes because of the age gap. And we didn't have the same friends. And so it was a great experience to work with her.

Riggenbach: That's wonderful.

Ramirez: Yes.

Riggenbach: I'm trying to picture Chicago in the 1970s. I imagine it was relatively difficult for your parents to come over here and to adapt to this new life.

[0:04:36]

Ramirez: Yeah, so what I've asked my father and what he's related to me is, he actually came here because one of his friends from his hometown offered him an opportunity to come here. Because I always ask, why Chicago? You know, it's so cold, it's so far away from Mexico. I'm like, why Chicago?

[0:04:58] He's like, well, the opportunity was given to me for a friend that was very generous. He actually helped me pay my way to come here to Chicago. So in

that time, that's like the greatest opportunity ever. Who ever is going to give you, let's say, some money to – I mean, I don't know at that time how much it was, but I imagine it's quite an amount of money to come here. You hear about already what it costs these days, so imagine those days.

[0:05:29] And he had farming experience, so what amount could he pay that was equal to that? A great deal of amount that people were paying to come over here. So he did say that it was a friend and he offered him the opportunity. We actually have family in California who did not give him the help. He actually did travel to California and stayed with the relatives, but they kind of gave him the stink eye after a couple days.

[0:06:03] And he was going to go farming over there, because they have a lot of the farming plants over there. And they just were not – we're not, like, going to help him at all. Yeah, so this is his own family. So he actually took his friend's opportunity, and then he ran with it, and he came over here. So at that time, my oldest sister was already born, and they also struggled too.

[0:06:31] Because he was long distance, and fathering from a long distance, his parents, my grandparents, stepped in a lot, and they lived with my grandparents at the time. And my dad would send money, and obviously he wasn't going to go back and forth because he had no way of coming back, and he was providing for the entire family from here. So that's basically why we came to Chicago.

[0:06:57]

Riggenbach: When did your mom move, and then your sister?

Ramirez: Yeah, so when they had the amnesty – I'm going to say late seventies, I'm not entirely sure, but that's when my father was able actually to put the paperwork through to get amnesty for my mother, my sister, and then my brother eventually. Because he actually did end up going back. You know, they had a few months together, and my brother eventually came.

[0:07:29] So through the amnesty, they were able to fix their papers. So that's how they kind of like, all right, we're going to start transitioning into making your way back to me. So he didn't want to continue a life over there. He saw a better opportunity here. And I think it was – I was born here in '84.

[0:07:58] I'm going to say they probably came in the early eighties.

Riggenbach: Wow. And have you noticed differences in your experiences versus your siblings, since you were born here, having the American citizenship.

Ramirez: Yes, I did see the struggle, even though they did have the proper documentation. They did struggle a lot with the language, just as far as what I saw with my sister.

[0:08:29] She couldn't acclimate properly. She did miss her life in Mexico. She missed obviously my grandparents, because she was very attached to them. And she did kind of have like a trauma where she just shut down. She did mention a lot that she – when somebody would speak to her in English, she would just cry and shut down. She just, like, you know, I don't know what's she's saying, and I'm not comfortable here.

[0:09:01] You know, it was an experience where nobody could help her. And at that time, a lot of kids are not understanding at any time. But yeah, they just made it maybe more of a bad experience for her because she was not able to acclimate properly, and they didn't have that – well, now they have that bilingual teaching, so early on, they didn't.

[0:09:30] Because it was so new. And she did struggle. And my older brother, I don't think it was a big struggle, but the thing that I did see was like school was fine, because he was able to learn the language right in time for when he started school. So eventually, they both started speaking English. But the thing that I saw later on in life is, they really struggled when they wanted to get their citizenship.

[0:09:58] So initially, I had asked my brother – and he's right now, like when I'm talking in this conversation, he was a teenager – and I'm like, oh, you know, it's really going to help out that you're going to be a citizen. And he's like, no, I don't ever want to be a citizen of the United States. He's like, I'm Mexican forever. And I'm like, that doesn't take away. You know, me, as a younger sibling, I was like, that doesn't take away from you being Mexican.

[0:10:28] But my understanding and his understanding were way different, but he felt like his nationality was going to be taken away because of that. But I did see him struggle with getting the paperwork properly filled out, the payment. It was extremely expensive at that time. And this was early 2000s probably when he got his citizenship.

[0:10:59] So initially, my mom, my dad, and my sister, in the mid-nineties, they all put the paperwork to obtain their naturalization. So they were going to put my brother too, but when he said that, they're like, you know, we can't force you. But they wanted to make it easier for him, because it was less expensive at that moment. It's like, we have to do it now because of inflation and things are going to start rising.

[0:11:28] So I did see that struggle where it was just hard. It's a hard process for citizenship.

Riggenbach: I imagine that the emotional strain of it is also hard, because I know it's very drawn out.

Ramirez: Yes, so I remember – I don't know if I was in seventh or eighth grade, but I was learning about the U.S. constitution. So at that moment, when they're getting ready, I'm helping them get ready too.

[0:11:59] You know, it's already a struggle, because they had to do it in English. I hear now that you can do it in Spanish, but they had to do it in English. And we're over here with flash cards, I'm over here asking the questions, and I'm learning it at the same time they are. So it's exciting, because we're learning together, and we don't even know it, that we're at least helping each other out. But I remember that I helped tutoring them, and I was helping them, like, quizzing them, and that's how we both helped each other.

[0:12:32] And then I remember at the end, when they actually went to take their verbal test and answer these questions, my sister did not get one question about the constitution. They had a regular conversation about her whole, like – just give her story. This guy didn't ask. I don't know who it was. And then, well, obviously, he could see that she knew the language, she had already studied here.

[0:12:59] And there's no reason to ask these questions, because she obviously understands, knows the language, and has been prepared here. So I guess that's what that was, but she was ready too. She was like, he did not ask me nothing about the constitution. So she was kind of relieved. She's like, it's been years since I took the constitution. But she was ready. And then my dad, actually, he got discriminated. He said he had an African-American lady that was asking him the questions.

[0:13:30] And then he felt like he couldn't understand, maybe it was because of the accent or something. So in one of the questions, he was prepared, he was ready, he knew what he was doing, he was going to answer. And in one of the questions, I remember, he'll say it to this day. He's like, she asked me something, I didn't quite catch it. I said, can you please repeat? And she's like, let's go. Let's go. [snapping fingers]

[0:13:56] So I saw that, I'm like, that is so rude. Like, why? What's the reason? You could simply just repeat yourself. And I understand, like, he already has a hard time understanding in English, and then if you have some type of accent, it's even harder. So we thought he didn't get his citizenship. So at the time that my mom and my sister had already got their – you know, the green light to go get sworn in, my dad didn't get any word.

[0:14:27] And he's like, oh my gosh, I gotta start the process again. So we were there, we went to Soldier Field, they had the big ceremony. And it was my mom and

my sister. I can't remember what year, but I remember it was a hot day. And then my dad's like, well, I didn't get the citizenship, so I have to wait and do the second round and see if I can do it then. Months later, he got a response to go get sworn in for citizenship. And he's like, why did it take so long? Like, what was this about?

[0:15:02] So I did see some discrimination there for him not probably understanding very well in English. He's able to defend himself in English, but unfortunately, that situation kind of just set him off, like, what's going on, I don't understand. And then he doesn't hear anything for quite some months. So he didn't get sworn in when they initially all put the applications together.

[0:15:34] But my mom had no problem. She was able to answer the questions, and she had no – like, even the guy was understanding and she didn't have any hiccups with the person that interviewed her.

Riggenbach: That's good to hear, but I can imagine for your dad, that must have just been somewhat excruciating, all that waiting and the frustration and everything.

[0:15:58]

Ramirez: Yeah, I feel like he definitely saw that he was discriminated against, and he was just like, you know, what can I do? There's nothing you can really do in those situations, because it's your word against the person who interviewed you.

Riggenbach: It's the system.

Ramirez: Yes.

Riggenbach: Is that something that you and your family have experienced throughout your life in Chicago, with that type of maybe not always as overt, but less obvious forms of discrimination?

[0:16:31]

Ramirez: I'm going to say – like, what I can recall, I feel like the biggest one – and there has been some situations, but probably some stuff that I'm just able to overlook and I'm just like, you know what, I'm not going to put too much effort into that. Like, it's little things. But one thing I can remember, and this was a big deal, because it affected our financial stability.

[0:17:02] So my father was a roofer for many years, and I remember that the owner of his company, he was very giving, he was doing very well, and he would pass that on. But once he passed on the company to his son, there was a lot of financial troubles.

[0:17:29] My understanding was, he wasn't very – like, he just spent money, and he wasn't [inverting] back into the company. So they saw a lot of issues. But the thing that I saw is, once he had some – they ran into some legal problems, the company, and what ended up happening is, they tried to do like a little switcheroo. So they ended up selling the company to a friend.

[0:18:00] But he was still the owner per se. So I remember my dad's constantly calling this person who supposedly is an owner. You know, I haven't been paid, or where's my hours that you haven't paid me? So they kind of just took that as, you know, you're not going to do anything. And they ended up robbing them a couple times of pay.

[0:18:32] And who do we go to, you know? And he's just in limbo, like what do I do? I think he was in his maybe mid forties, so again, that's a blow to him, because he's been working so many years with this company. He's like, what else do I do? So I remember that I had to constantly be calling him, even trying to scare him like, oh, we're going to go to a lawyer or something.

[0:18:59] But we didn't know who to go with, because obviously this person was – he was always on the go. He didn't have a direct address. He would say, I'm at this address, but there was just some shady stuff going on. So he ended up not paying him for some hours. There were some checks that were left unsettled, work that wasn't paid for. And I'm like, daddy, you just have to stop working there, because you keep on giving them these free hours, and they're gaining from that, and they really don't care if they pay you or not.

[0:19:34] They're just taking your labor. So that was kind of hard. But it kind of helped me out. Like, he was on unemployment, and I was already at the point where I had kids, and they were babies. They were little. And he was my babysitter, you know? I would go work, or I would go to school, and then he would help me out. So it was just kind of like – you know, it was a godsend for me, but maybe not for him, because he's just so used to being on the go and working.

[0:20:02] But I feel like that was one of the biggest discriminations I saw and that I couldn't do anything there. I didn't know who to turn to for help.

Riggenbach: Wow. Was he able to find another job after that?

Ramirez: Yes, so eventually he did. He actually just retired from there. It was a bakery. It's called Alpha Bakery.

[0:20:29] And he has been working there since 2009. So it was not the easiest work, because it's like a factory. You're standing up for many hours in hot conditions, obviously, because he's in an oven. It's a bakery. And I saw him, like, I'm not giving up. That's all I saw. I'm not giving up. He would come home with burns.

Ramirez_Gab

[0:20:59] He lost a lot of weight in the summer, because, you know, they're constantly sweating, and it's already hot. And I'm like, oh my gosh. I was like, it's just so hard for him, but he is not giving up. And he had some knee problems. Like, he'd come home and he's like, I'm done for the day, because he was done standing up 10 hours, 11 hours, I don't know how many hours. But yeah, it was – I'm so glad he's retired.

[0:21:30]

Riggenbach: Absolutely. And so kind of going back to that chronological order, what was high school like for you?

Ramirez: High school? It was fun, and at the same time, I was just like, let me get my stuff done, I need to get out of here. I had some friends that weren't in the right steps, you know?

[0:21:59] But I didn't follow them. I was just like, you know what, you do what you gotta do, but we're friends in here. That was nice. Throughout the whole four years, I actually got rides from my mom, because her job was on the way, so I didn't have to struggle much with public transportation. But on the way back, I remember, I was like, oh my gosh, I wish my mom would pick me up. But she got out later in the day. But overall, it was just like, you know, I'm going to put my head down and work and do what I have to do and concentrate on graduating.

[0:22:32] So I did get good grades. No distractions from boys, so I was glad that I was able to focus and get out of there, because who knows what I would have done, you know? I hear a lot of things about people dropping out and stuff. But at that point, I was like, all right, I'm following in my sister's footsteps. I want to go to college, I want to do all I can do.

[0:22:59] I wasn't very involved in anything, like any sports or anything. It was just like, yeah, all right, I did my time, and I want to go home. But I would work after school, so it was [unintelligible 0:23:11], it was just – I think I was a sophomore, so I was working every evening at a hardware store. So that took my time and kept me out of trouble.

[0:23:25] And I got my little money, so whatever I wanted to get or anything, I would get it for myself. So I just don't remember anything big or any crazy experience. I just remember go to school, go back home, and go to work, and that was it.

Riggenbach: What did you want to do after high school at that point?

[0:23:57]

Ramirez: At that point, I wanted to go to college. I did want to stay local. I wanted to go to UIC. And I ended up getting in there. I wanted to study, at that point, it was

either nursing or pharmacy that I was like, oh my gosh, I want to go into that field. I ended up getting accepted to UIC, but then it was just like, I didn't get the financial aid, or I didn't get all the help I thought I would get.

[0:24:35] Again, I did suffer some discrimination from my counselor at school. I would see that she would help out the African-Americans, and she would not pay any attention to the Mexicans. And I was like, wow, I did get some help from another teacher. He had nothing to do with the counseling, but he was like, you know, I'm going to give you the practice book for the ACT.

[0:25:05] And he burned me a copy of the questions, so I can have a study guide. And I remember, he was like my big helper there, because I was like, who else do I turn to? And I also, at that moment, I think I had for two years worked with the school treasurer, so she helped me out a lot too.

[0:25:28] She gave me the pointers. She pointed out some stuff. She's like, apply for this, apply for that. And it was just like, you know, the help came from the most random place. And I'm like, oh my gosh, I'm somebody who – I had worked with her. I was helping cutting checks, budgeting, and they gave this opportunity to me through one of my career – it was like a career enhancement class.

[0:26:06] And so I remember that he was like, you know, I want you to go work with the treasurer. And so that was exciting to me, because I'm like, I got to see the inner works of how a school worked. So that's basically how I felt like – not everybody is going to help you, but there's these opportunities that you don't even see coming, you know?

Riggenbach: Did you end up going to UIC?

[0:26:34]

Ramirez: I did. I did. I went for like two semesters. And like I said, the financial burden on my dad was kind of hard. I mean, he already has five kids to raise and clothe and feed. He had his house. And that payment was kind of steep.

[0:27:00] And he actually didn't have to pay much for my sister, so he was like, you know, come on, your sister got this help, why can't you get it? And I'm like, well, I asked her, but she's so busy with her life that she can't really help me. And that's when the internet was just starting, so imagine dialup. Oh my gosh, it was just a pain to try and even get any information.

[0:27:30] So I was just like, you know what, I'm just done with my second semester. I'm like, I didn't have that same push anymore because I was just like, man, I don't want to be a financial burden for my father.

Riggenbach: That must have been really hard.

Ramirez_Gab

Ramirez: It was, because I was like, you know what, no. I was like, I'm not going to – I see the payments. I actually bought my own book so I didn't have to ask him for money, and money that I made from working that I had saved.

[0:28:03] And you know, daily commuting to this location, which it wasn't far but still, daily commutes and meals and everything else. Like, I can't ask him for any more money. So I was just like, you know what, after the second semester, I'm done. And I'm going to figure out what else I'm going to do. So I ended up going to an eight month program, the medical assistant programming. That's what I ended up doing.

[0:28:30]

Riggenbach: So you still got that sense of the medical field that you were originally looking for.

Ramirez: Mm-hm.

Riggenbach: But I'm sorry for that experience.

Ramirez: Yeah, it was difficult, but I ended up coming out of there like, okay, I accomplished this myself. And I paid my way through it.

Riggenbach: It sounds like from the beginning, you've always grown up quick.

[0:28:59]

Ramirez: Yes, yes, whether I wanted to or not, I did feel like that early on. It was like, you know, you do get those summers where you're like, oh, I do feel like a kid, but there was always something like, oh, grow up, let's go, let's do this, let's take care of that. And it's not like – I don't feel like it's anybody's fault. It was a great experience too, because now I'm able to defend myself in situations where I'm like, okay, well, I have an issue with whatever it could be.

[0:29:34] Something big. Like, I feel like, okay, well, I have the resources. I also have my parents to ask for advice, and they're very well rounded too, even though they had to jump in too and learn quick. But yeah, I do see that I had to grow up quick and at an early age.

Riggenbach: It sounds like, though, you have a lot to be proud of because of that, with what you've accomplished up to now.

[0:30:03]

Ramirez: Yes, definitely. I see how that all prepared me, and I don't think I would have wanted it any other way, because you just think about early on, you had these experiences, and now you have that under your belt, you know? So it

was a great experience, and I wouldn't change it for anything else. And I continue to help my parents.

[0:30:29] Now with bigger things, where I'm like, oh my gosh. I was there for a refinance or something like that, and I'm like, you know, maybe at my age they don't do it, or they do, but you don't have any – when do we ever teach that in school? Like, when do they teach you this? So it's like, you know, it's a great experience, because there's a lot of things that I'm like, all right. Like, even buying a car.

[0:30:56] It's like, oh my gosh, what am I getting myself into. And my dad's like, you got it, you got it. I'm like, I do? And he's just giving me this confidence, and I'm like, okay, I got it. You know, big purchases or whatever it is. You know, you just feel more confident, because it's kind of been step by step the way with my parents.

Riggenbach: When did you first start having your children?

Ramirez: I had my first son in 2004, so that was when I was already kind of like, all right, well, I can't continue on with school.

[0:31:36] And he came about. And then when he was probably like a couple months, that's when I started preparing myself with the medical assisting. So that's like, oh my gosh, I have that big financial responsibility, I've got to make sure that I have money to take care of him.

[0:31:58] And then that's when I felt myself very confident, where I had to ask for the assistance from the government, because I'm like, all right, I don't have any type of – I was working temporary jobs, so I didn't have that financial – that big responsibility. But I didn't have the insurance for him. So I was like, oh my gosh, he's a baby, I need to take him for his regular checkups.

[0:32:31] And I was responsible about that. My dad and my mom fully supported me. I actually did live with them for a few months, and then I moved out. But they would let me borrow their car and something like that, and that was a big help, because going on the bus to take a little baby to a doctor's appointment, it would have been so difficult. But I did have a lot of their help, so that helped out a lot.

[0:32:59] And that's when I started having my kids. So I had the first one in 2004 and that's when I went to the medical assisting. I prepared myself. I was working in an MRI clinic. So we ended up moving out. We lived in a – it wasn't that good of an area, but, you know, at least I could say that I had my own place, and I had something to offer to them.

[0:33:30] In 2007, that's when I had my other son. Their father was just like, ugh. There was a lot of issues, and I feel like it was a lot of instability. My parents warned

me not to go. It's like, it's not going to go anywhere. There's no future. But I ended up following him to Iowa where his family was.

[0:33:59] He was going to be working with a construction company. And I was like, all right, so I ended up moving everything over there. Then maybe in 2008, I came back to Chicago, and I was like, I'm not comfortable, and that's not a life for me. It was really hard to get a job too, with already my medical assistant experience.

[0:34:29] I put in applications everywhere, but nobody really was able to – I wasn't able to get my foot in the door unless I knew somebody. So I had the experience, I had the certifications, but there was no opportunity unless you knew somebody. So I struggled a lot to get a job. So already, I was just like, man, you know, I'm not going to be home all the time. I need to be able to have that second income to provide for my kids.

[0:35:01] So it was kind of hard, so I just said, uh-uh, I'm leaving. I've got to go back to Chicago and figure out what I'm going to do.

Riggenbach: Was that before you moved to Morris, Illinois?

Ramirez: Oh yes. So Morris was in – it was like a little bit after my first son. It was in 2004, like to maybe 2005. It wasn't that long. I know I was there maybe between a year and less than a year.

[0:35:32] But yeah, we moved out there. Their father was working in a sandblasting place. He also had farmer jobs, like he worked planting trees. So that was a very nice location, very laid back. It was the country, and it was close to home. It wasn't far away. So whenever I wanted, I could come back.

[0:35:59] But yeah, it was a short period of time because, like I said, there was so much instability with him, and then he would just, on the drop of a dime just, all right, I need to go over here, I'm tired of this, I need to go over here. So I was like, you know, I can't be just moving my whole life just when you want to. I need that stability. So yeah, through Iowa, I think I was just like, already, like, I'm done with this relationship.

[0:36:32] Like, I can't keep following you. There's no stability. This is not good for the kids. When I came back, I was just like, you know what, we have to reevaluate our relationship. I can't be just, on the drop of a dime, and let's go – pick up and go.

[0:36:58] So when I came back, that was 2009. No, 2008. And the kids were little. I was already working in the MRI clinic, and my mom and dad were helping me. My mom worked nights at that time. So she was able to watch my kids during the day, and then she would drop them off at the babysitter for the last – you know, afternoon hours between the time I got back home.

[0:37:29] So it worked out good. There was no rush, I didn't have to get them up in the morning. At that point, they were toddlers, and they hadn't gone to school yet. So it worked out perfectly. In 2011 or 2012, their father was deported. And like I said, we were just back and forth. We were just in limbo like, all right, we're together, but you're over there in Iowa, and I live over here in Chicago.

[0:38:03] So it was just like, uh, you know, that's not a relationship for me. He eventually came back to live with us in Chicago, but he got deported in – I can't remember if it was 2011 or 2012. We were all living here in Chicago, and I had my two boys. So I just remember that was traumatic for the kids, because they were so used to him being around.

[0:38:33] And I just remember that until this day, I can ask the oldest one, and he's like, I remember. He's like, I just cried. I was like, do you remember what you did? And he's like, yeah, I just cried. I'm like, oh my gosh. I was like, that has to be a traumatic experience for him because he remembers, and he was probably only four. And I ask him to this day, and he was able to tell me. And I'm like, this gives me chills, because I was like, at an early age, you were put through a lot emotionally.

[0:39:03] So yeah, eventually I was just like, you know what, this relationship's not working out. I'm not following you to Mexico. That's not the life I want for my kids. And you obviously have some growing up to do, so we're on our own separate ways. And I said definitely keep in touch with them. I want you to build a relationship. Which he never did.

[0:39:30] So yeah, kind of sucks, you know? Because they were so attached to him, but he didn't take the effort to keep that relationship and build on it. He just was like, all right. Like I said, he had a lot of growing up to do, and he probably hasn't done that yet, until now, at all.

[0:39:57] So yeah, that's how that went. And like I said, to this day, there's little to no calls from him.

Riggenbach: But I suppose on a happier note – was it in 2014 when you and Eddy met?

Ramirez: Yeah, we met in 2013, actually. We were dating and talking, and we both had our own family already started. But obviously it didn't work out with our first partners, so we were just focusing on our kids.

[0:40:32] He was too. He was focused on his kids. And when we saw each other, we were just like, oh my gosh, somebody that I can relate to was definitely a happier note. I was excited to have a new experience and share my thoughts and feelings with him. But we still kept very separate. It was about maybe two years when we finally introduced everybody.

[0:41:01] But I guess we both wanted to just make sure everything was going well between us first because we jumped and said, all right, meet my boyfriend, or meet my girlfriend. But yeah, I think that was a different experience in the way that obviously he conducted himself. He was very respectful.

[0:41:30] And with my ex, I was just like, I'm just so over it. He's so childish, and I just don't want to be around that. So yeah, the kids were all understanding. They were happy to meet each other. It was like, oh my gosh, it was just so crazy that they just clicked well. They hung out and I was just like, wow, this is like the perfect scenario.

[0:41:57] It was great that they were able to get along, and they liked each other's company.

Riggenbach: Do they all live here?

Ramirez: No, so my step children don't live here. They're all with their mom. And then obviously my boys are here. Nathan came in 2016, and then they got to meet him when he was little, but for some reason, we had a falling out, and they don't come around very much anymore.

[0:42:27] But you know, we really do miss them.

Riggenbach: I'm sorry to hear that.

Ramirez: Yeah.

Riggenbach: And what year did you and Eddy get married?

Ramirez: We got married in 2017. Got married in June. And we had them there, all of them were present, so our whole blended family was there. It was very nice. They were all excited, and they were actually there too when he proposed. So they were part of it too.

[0:42:56] And I was just like, I had no idea, but it was so exciting, because I'm like, they were all, like, super excited. And they're like, oh my gosh, she's getting married. So it was so nice to hear that there was acceptance too between all of them. So I was like, oh my gosh. I'm like, they knew how to keep this secret. They were just, like, in total bliss too. Like, oh my gosh, this is happening. But yeah, at that time, my step children, they were able to be there for the engagement, and they were there for the wedding.

[0:43:32]

Riggenbach: How did he propose?

Ramirez: He proposed on Christmas Eve, and I wasn't feeling good that day. I remember because I was kind of sick. And we ended up going to my sister,

because she likes to host Christmas Eve. So my sister was in on it too. And I remember that I just noticed that Eddy was really nervous. And it was so funny, because I was like, what's wrong?

[0:43:58] I'm like, let's go. And he's like, hold on, hold on. I guess he was just building up the courage to propose. And he knew he was going to do it that day, but it was just so funny because I'm like, all right, I'm so done. I had a headache, I'm like, I'm so done, let's go. It was like 10:00 or 11:00, and I'm like, I'm so done, let's go, I want to go home. He's like, hold on, hold on, give us a minute, give us a minute. And I was like, no, no, no, I just want to go. And then I remember I got up, I got my stuff together, I was getting Nathan together.

[0:44:30] And at that time, I was just like, all right, boys, let's go, let's go, everybody, let's start getting your coats, go in the bathroom, you know? We got a long ride. Because she's about an hour and a half away from here. And then I was like, turned around and then he's, like, right there with the ring. And I'm like, oh my gosh. I just was in tears. I remember, I was like, oh my gosh, it's happening.

[0:44:56] And it was so exciting. It was just – like, the joy in my face. I think that my whole persona just changed from frustrated and tired and I want to go, and I was moody, to, I was in heaven. Like, oh my gosh. Totally ecstatic. I could not help – I was hugging everybody else, like, oh my gosh. But yeah, and then the boys and all the kids, they were like, oh my gosh, she said yes, she said yes.

[0:45:32]

Riggenbach: That is so sweet.

Ramirez: Yes.

Riggenbach: I love a good proposal story.

Male Voice: I love you.

Ramirez: Love you. Ya te vas?

Male Voice: Yeah.

Ramirez: Y la basura?

Male Voice: [unintelligible]

Ramirez: Thank you. That's the oldest. So yeah, I was just like, I was in total bliss to. I was like, oh my gosh, this is happening, this is happening.

Ramirez_Gab

[0:45:58] And then you just kind of ride that wave of, this is a beautiful moment. So I just remember that I was just like, nobody can get me off my cloud. I was so happy.

Riggenbach: That's wonderful. And then when did you start your current job at Global Telecom Technology? Is that the name?

Ramirez: Mm-hm, Global Telecom Technology.

[0:46:26] I did mention I worked with my sister, so that started 2009. I started off as a receptionist slash office manager. So that's why I said I was working with her. It was exciting. I got to meet with her. So originally, it was Global Capacity, and then Global Telcom Technology bought out Global Capacity.

[0:46:54] So in that time, just before they had bought Global Telcom Technology, and this was me coming back from maternity leave, my sister now was let go from that company. And then they knew they were going to do their whatever movements they needed to do financially to keep up this new company. So she got let go, and then this new company bought out. So I've been with them – originally I was grandfathered.

[0:47:30] So since 2009 until now, yes.

Riggenbach: And that's quite a change from the medical field.

Ramirez: It is. So when I mentioned that I moved to Iowa, and it was really difficult, it was that recession period. So you remember that recession? It was just so hard. People were losing their jobs. There wasn't a lot of job opportunities.

[0:47:55] So I came back and I was like, oh, you know, I'm going to try and get back into the medical field. And I had been I guess so many years out of it that I was just like, impossible to get back in now here in Chicago. So I kind of like messed myself up by leaving and then coming back. So I ended up just doing whatever jobs came along. I was doing a lot of temping, but this was temping for nothing to do with my field again.

[0:48:27] I was working in factories and trying to just keep my head above water, because I was trying to provide for my children. So at that time, I believe I went and moved back with my parents, and like I said, I had their help, but obviously extra stuff that they needed, I needed to have that money, so I started temping. And then that's when my sister said, oh, there's an opportunity at my job, would you like to come?

[0:48:59] She's like, it's just a receptionist, and it's temporary, but if they like how you work and you're responsible, it could lead to other things. I was like, perfect. So it was just like the best opportunity, because I was just like, you know what, I need to get my foot in the door somewhere. So I started off as a

receptionist. We moved to another location. We were right across from Sears Tower at that time.

[0:49:29] And we moved down to right across the street from the Thompson Center. So it was beautiful locations. Both of them were very nice settings, and I really liked that area in the downtown. It was just very busy and it was very convenient to get there through the public transportation. So it was just great. It was a great location.

[0:49:55] So we ended up moving to the new office, and that's when I got my new title, office manager. And eventually, I was like, oh, you know, I want to help out with the human resources. So I would help here and there. I didn't really have a title. It was just, you know, assistant for the human resources department. So it kind of helped me move up in the ladder, like, where am I going, what's my direction? So I ended up going to another position that was available.

[0:50:30] They had an opportunity for a pricing manager, which I was like, I don't know what they do, but I kind of like working with one of the employees there that she kind of – she interviewed me, and she kind of gave me the background of what it was. And I was like, yes, I'm interested. And I was like, this is a very unique position, and it's an opportunity for me to learn more about the business, the telecom business.

[0:51:03] So I ended up getting hired with them, and I was no longer an office manager, but I was still in that area, so whenever they needed help or anything, I would help whenever needed. But it helped me learn more about the telecom business, and then obviously get my foot in the door for higher pay.

[0:51:30] So yes, it was just something that I was just like – it was such a unique title. I had no idea what I was getting myself into, but since they said, you know, you're a fast learner, you can learn on the job, I was like, perfect. I was like, I need to get my foot in the door to get a higher pay. And yeah, ever since then, it's something that comes naturally to me, I really enjoy it. Like I said, we can do it from anywhere, so that helps out a lot.

[0:52:03] Both companies, very understanding. Like, there was times that we had to travel to Iowa to go see my son's family. I was able to work from there no problem. It was like, okay, just make sure you keep on top of your work. And they totally confided in me. So it was totally different from the medical field, because the medical field's like, no, you can't take a day off, or they were frowned upon, you know?

[0:52:31] It was just so difficult to get some understanding, and I was just like, you know, with growing kids and doctors' visits and have to go to school or whatever, there was emergencies sometimes at school that I had to go pick

them up earlier. They got sick, whatever the case. They were so understanding. And I was just like, this is the best job for me now, at this point, as a mom, because at the drop of a dime, I have to go pick them up.

[0:53:00] Like, they need me, I need to go. And they are so understanding. They're like, yep, you'll take care of what you've got to take care of when you come back. Don't worry about it. And I was like, oh my gosh, what other job offers that kind of flexibility? That they offer that understanding? Especially when you have young children, they get sick often. You have to go pick them up early or whatever the case may be.

[0:53:27] I was like, they were just like, go, go. I was like, oh my gosh, I've never had that with a job. So it was just, this is the perfect opportunity, this is the best job setting for me at this point in my life.

Riggenbach: That's wonderful.

Ramirez: Yes.

Riggenbach: And I think we in our pre-interview, you mentioned being a quoting analyst? Is that your current title?

Ramirez: Yes. Quoting analyst. It's kind of changed, but it means the same thing, pricing analyst, quoting analyst.

[0:53:57] So it's quoting manager. It all means the same thing. I quote out prices for big corporations or small locations. It could be from Walgreens to Route 21. It goes anywhere from hospitals to mattress places.

[0:54:28] I've seen small law offices. We just quote all over the place, yes.

Riggenbach: And starting to get into that conversation about the pandemic, what was the end of 2019 like for you? I know that's kind of going back.

Ramirez: No, I have it very present though. I remember Eddie ran into some health issues really bad.

[0:55:00] He had to go to the hospital, it was just like life or death. And I remember that I was just like, I had so much of the support from the boys, I had Nathan still maybe like a three year old. And they were older. There's a big gap between the oldest that just left – he's about 14 years older than Nathan. And Chris is ten years older than Nathan, so it's just like, they're already almost teenagers at this point of 2019.

[0:55:30] And I just remember I was like, you know, dad needs me, I need to go to the hospital, I need to take him. And I was just like, he was just not doing well. And I'm like, there's something wrong, and we need to go to the hospital or the doctor. So I ended up making an appointment for him with our general

doctor, and he's like, you know what, I need you to go to the hospital now. So 2019, end of 2019, this is all December, I'm like, oh my gosh, we're not going to have a Christmas.

[0:55:59] We had to be dealing with this new thing. I don't want him to die. It was just so traumatic. I was just like, I remember I was leaning heavily on the boys because I was like, you guys watch Nathan while I go to the hospital. And I was just transitioning between home and the hospital. He wasn't there that long. I think maybe about a week.

[0:56:27] I was like, oh my gosh, I don't know what I'm going to do. Like, oh my gosh, if he dies, what's going to happen? It was just so early in our relationship that I'm like, oh wow, going through this. But we came out learning the things about each other and ways to better our relationship. I feel like it got a little stronger. But you know, it was just dealing with something very difficult.

[0:56:56] Because at that time too, the oldest, one of his best friends had passed away in an accident. So I'm like, I have him depressed, I don't know what to do. He's just shutting down like the older one. But at the same time, he's like, mom, don't worry, go see Eddie, go see how he's doing, see if he needs anything, we got it here. So I would make sure that they take care of of homework and whatever. And this was the time around the time that they're about to go into that Christmas vacation break.

[0:57:32] So I'm like, oh my gosh, I don't know what to do. But we made it work. Like I said, I leaned heavily on the boys, and I don't know how I did it, but they just helped out where they could and made sure there was dinner. And I was like, I'll be back. I didn't come home very late. It was probably like 10:00. They were already showered and ready to get to bed. They took on that responsibility.

[0:57:58] Like, next day, get ready for school. But yeah, I remember that it was kind of difficult, because I'm like, I don't know what's going to happen, you know? This is just something that's – we kind of just kept it quiet. Like, I didn't tell my dad or my mom, my parents, so they wouldn't worry. And we just like, okay, we're going to work through this together. So a lot of that was him going to doctor's appointments or follow-ups with specialists.

[0:58:32] His mom did help out a lot with some advice to try and do some herbal remedies and stuff. And it did help out, because they gave him this medicine, and he's like, I can't take this medicine, this medicine's what got me really bad to the point that I had to go to the hospital. So he ended up doing a holistic treatment, and when he went back to his general doctor to get his follow up, he's like, whatever you're doing, keep doing it.

[0:59:01] And, like, I don't know what you did, but we got your numbers. Like, we found out he had diabetes, so he had a really high level of sugar in him, and his ketoacidosis was at a very critical stage. So being able to manage and keep that down was very – I didn't see the light at the end of the tunnel.

[0:59:34] I felt like yeah, that was it. So it was just like, you know, we've got to deal with whatever comes at you. So I remember that was 2019. And we ended up having a Christmas after all. Like, I don't know how we did it. I just remember that Eddie was sleeping a lot. I would rest with him. I actually took maybe the week or two off to be with him.

[1:00:02] And then you know, make sure everything was okay in the house and everything was as normal as possible. And we did have our tree up. We did kind of have that Christmas experience, which I thought it was going to be totally lost. I'm like, I have no time for this, I have no time for that. We actually did get some gifts. And it did feel like Christmas.

[1:00:27] And I remember that we did as best as possible, and Eddie was working through his health issues in the house. And I just remember, like, resting a lot with him, because it was so draining that we had lived this experience. So I was so glad that eventually he came back and was fine and was doing well, health wise.

Riggenbach: I'm very glad to hear that.

Ramirez: Yes.

[1:00:57]

Riggenbach: Kind of going into 2020, were you guys hopeful that the worst was behind you with his struggles?

Ramirez: Yes. Like I said, he was off for an injury at work. So I think that happened early on. He was already getting ready for surgery. He was trying to get all his paperwork together, like, late 2019. So then he had that health issue.

[1:01:27] And then everything got postponed. So we already knew we were going to come up with another – it was going to be another struggle, because we were going to be dealing with him being out of work, his injury and all the care that goes into that. So we kind of already knew, all right, this year it's going to be a little tight, but we have to deal with it.

[1:01:56] Right when they had this whole announcement of this pandemic and how everything happened, which was, what, like, March 2022? So I remember – and this is where I say that the pandemic officially started for me, was because they – I had my friend here. She was visiting me, and we were just

having breakfast. And I was working by the time she was here, but she only came for like a few hours.

[1:02:25] And I remember we saw the announcement on the TV, like, officially, Monday or Tuesday is the kids' last day, everybody's going to do remote learning. And I'm like, that's when it hit me, like, oh, crap, this is serious. Yeah, we both looked at each other like, what are we going to do with the kids home all day? She's a stay at home mom, and she's like – you know, she already has a lot on her plate, I'm pretty sure, you know, handling the house, chores, making sure the kids are dropped off.

[1:02:54] She does a lot more than probably I do in the mornings. And I'm like, oh my gosh, what are we going to do? I'm like, I'm already home, and I'm working. How am I going to be able to balance this work from home and have the kids home schooling. I just looked at – we both looked at each other like, we're confused. Like, I don't know what's going to happen. And with Eddie having to do all his medical care and everything that he needed to do for his injury, it's not like I can rely on him.

[1:03:31] But he did step in a lot of times. You know, dinners when he could. Driving them to – let's say they needed to go to the library. I don't even remember if libraries were open. I think everything shut down. He's like, I don't want you to go out. He's like, I don't want you to get exposed. So he'd do a lot of the runs to the store or anything that we needed. He was the one doing everything. And I'm like, on top of that, he had been just fresh out of surgery.

[1:03:58] And had to take on that load. And I'm like, oh my gosh. I didn't want to impose on him, but also, he saw the need, like, okay, you can't be going out, I don't want you to be exposed to this. Like, let's just try and contain ourselves in one area. He's like, I'll do all the errands, and then you handle everything in the house. And that's how we kept the balance.

[1:04:28]

Riggenbach: January 30 is when the World Health Organization declared Covid a public health emergency, but it really wasn't until March 9 when Governor Pritzker of Illinois declared the disaster proclamation and then March 13, 2020 is when he closed the schools. And originally, it was supposed to be for two weeks. Did you think that it was going to last longer at that point?

[1:04:55]

Ramirez: I thought, you know, all right, two weeks, that's good. I was like, you know, I didn't know what other to expect of what we were already doing to prevent it. I was like, all right, they're going to kind of have the kids how we have them now. I was thinking they were going to do a few kids go to school one day, like three days, and then the rest of the week, some other kids come. Like,

switching off. And I'm like, that would kind of help the population of not being all crowded and you know how Chicago schools are very crowded.

[1:05:30] And I'm like, that would kind of help alleviate that whole distancing factor and how the kids now socialize, because everything's going to change for them. That's what I thought. All right, after two weeks, this is going to be their new normal. They're going to have the hybrid learning, some kids learning from home, some kids will be present. But yeah, I didn't think it was going to be that long.

[1:05:57]

Riggenbach: And I know you had mentioned that your work was already very flexible. Was it an easy transition to move fully remote for your work? And did they close the building down completely? How did that happen in your job?

Ramirez: Okay, for our job, I was already kind of staying home since 2019, because Eddie had those health issues. So I was just readily home already. So I told them, I will go into the office sometimes. And I ended up going maybe twice a week.

[1:06:32] But for 2020, we were told not to go to the office at all, don't even try and get anything. Whatever you had, that's what you – you know, your laptop or a monitor, that's all you need. Like, we'll get you situated remotely to gain access into our systems.

[1:06:55] And they ended up doing that. No problem, no hiccups. There was no issues with that. All of 2020, there was always updates which they told us, you know, we are monitoring the CDC guidelines, and as of right now – that was every month. They would give us an update like, as of right now, we do not recommend you go into the office, please don't try to access the office, everything you need and work wise, you have it at home.

[1:07:28] So for me, it was already an easy transition, because like I said, I was already doing that maybe once or twice, going into the office. And the rest of the week, I was home. I had Nathan in preschool by September of 2020.

[1:07:58] So all summer, the boys enjoyed their summer as best they could. We didn't really go much of anywhere. I think we ended up just going to the local forest park areas and having a nature walk, just to get out of the house, do something. But once school started in September, it was like, all right, the boys still had remote learning, I was hopeful that they would return to school.

[1:08:29] And I did mention that their experience was so different. It helped out the older one. Like, he was more on top of his tasks. His grades got better. And that one on one experience with his teachers helped him out so much. Not so much for the middle one, because I feel like he got lazy.

[1:09:00] He started to just be easily distracted with whatever. And trying to keep them all in one place, it was just so difficult, because they had so much going on, and there's so much difference between what they were learning. And they distracted each other. So it was just like fights. And at that time, that whole year, I had my nephew, whose name is Julius. So he is about two years younger than my middle son.

[1:09:32] So my son's 14, so at that point, they were 12 and 10. So my brother was like, we don't have internet at home, can you keep him here? So like the majority of the year, I had him here. He was doing his remote learning, and it was my responsibility to get him up in the morning, all of them. You know, had four boys, get all of them up, get them ready.

[1:09:58] And at that time, they were still doing – it was so new to them. And I tried to do it as normal as possible, and I kind of had that little teacher role, where I'm like, all right, I'm going to figure out how I'm going to do this, how am I going to make this work. So I ended up making little cardboard stations for them, so they had little reminders here and there. They had a little thing to block off, so they weren't distracted. But again, the voices and everybody's conversation about trying to conversate amongst each other, it was difficult.

[1:10:35] But you saw that they – once they got their work taken care of, it was just fun and games for them after that. So they tried to live as normal as possible. So I remember that it was kind of difficult with Nathan, because he demanded attention. He wasn't in school yet at that time, but he would distract the boys too.

[1:11:03] So I'm like, oh my gosh, I need to get him used to school, and he's going to start school in September, and I need to figure out how we're going to do that balance between him going to school and everything.

Riggenbach: How old was he at that point?

Ramirez: He was four. Yeah, so I was like, I definitely knew that I wanted to get him in preschool, because I'm like, he needs to start getting used that whole preschool setting and getting up in the morning.

[1:11:30] And that didn't work out how I wanted it to, because we ended up enrolling in a preschool, but because of the whole pandemic, they didn't have present classes with all the kids. So we did it all remotely. And I'm like, oh.

Riggenbach: Was that in spring of 2021? Or 2020?

Ramirez: This was fall of 2020. So I'm jumping ahead. But I remember, I was like, I need to start getting them ready.

[1:11:59] And I did enroll him actually in the park district. They had a little day camp for the park district. And so that kind of helped him to get used to being away from me. Because I was the one who took care of him the majority of his life. When he was a baby, he was taken care of by my husband's aunt, and then his mom for a short period of time.

[1:12:31] But other than that, like I said, my work was very understanding, so when I didn't have a babysitter for him, it was either me or Eddie. Eddie started work later in the evening, so I would be like okay, I'll go into the office from 8:00 to 2:00, then I'll come back, and then by the time he was going to head out to work, I would be home. So we kind of balanced it out that way.

[1:12:58] So he didn't really need a babysitter. He just demanded so much attention, I remember, in 2020. He was very eager to learn, he was very curious of things. And I'm like, I did enroll him in the park district. He went there for the day camp. It was just maybe like six weeks. And he got to meet new people, he got to do some fun activities that I would normally not be able to do with him because I'm working.

[1:13:30] So I remember it was a nice experience for him. He was like, oh, I did this, I did that. And it was just great to hear him be separate from me, because he was just so used to me.

Riggenbach: What's the day camp?

Ramirez: This day camp was with the Chicago park district.

Riggenbach: And what time period, did you say?

Ramirez: He started in July. Like a little bit after July 4.

[1:14:00] And they went up to like August 23.

Riggenbach: I think in our pre-interview, you mentioned that he had some trouble with boundaries and whatnot.

Ramirez: Yes. So think about this. Like, he's never been to a school setting. He's excited to see kids his own age. And in the midst of this pandemic, nobody can touch each other, nobody can play or have physical contact.

[1:14:28] And he's just not used to that. He's used to playing with his brothers, and they play fight or they play tag, and there's physical contact. So I remember that the coordinator, his teacher, was like, he touched this person, or he did this or he was playing around too rough with this person. And I'm like, these are kids. And I'm like, he's never been to a school setting, so he doesn't know the boundaries of, you know, giving each other personal space.

[1:14:59] I'm like, that's why I enrolled him, because I want him to kind of get that feel and obviously get these boundaries where he understands when it's okay and when it's not okay. And I'm like, and in the middle of this pandemic, how do you tell a kid not to hug somebody? He's used to being very affectionate. But yeah, there was a lot of issues where I feel like she wasn't understanding.

[1:15:28] Because of the pandemic, it blocked our whole way of living.

Riggenbach: Were you worried about him having some learning loss because of that?

Ramirez: Yes, so I know that a lot of the way that they learn is through touch and the sense of community. And I feel like he did lose a lot of that, because there's no way that you can teach a kid compassion just because – like, it's being very cold.

[1:16:05] How do you teach compassion, and how do you let them express emotion where with the middle of the pandemic, everything was so cold and frigid and don't touch me and don't get to close to me? I understand that point, but it's like a very cold world that he grew up in. I feel like how do I say, good job, and give him a high five from far away, but I can't give him a hug?

[1:16:34] Like, even the teacher, I'm pretty sure they sometimes feel the need to give a child a hug. Like, you know, somebody's hurt, or they feel like they've been hurt emotionally. And you can't even express that, I'm sorry. I feel like he did lose that, because, again, when I enrolled him in preschool, he's with me again.

[1:17:01] What does he feel? I feel like he just gets my point of view and not being exposed to other kids, he needs to get a sense of that. I feel like he lost that too. Because he's now getting in kindergarten, like that sense of how to play and I just feel like he was robbed of that.

[1:17:31] At least they should have had some kind of – well, we didn't know much about this, right, but how they do now. Like, all right, everybody have their mask on, and let's have at least one day where you have a play date. And I tried that with my friends, but again, they were scared too, like a play date or whatever? And they're like, no, they're going to get sick. And I'm like, well, as long as we're not sick, you can't get anybody sick. But everything was so new to us that we were just like, you know, I feel like we were all too scared to even make that effort to not be so segregated from everybody.

[1:18:07]

Riggenbach: I'm sorry to hear about all of that for your poor baby. But can you describe what a typical day looked like for you when you were home schooling in 2020 in that first part, like between March, before they got out for summer?

Ramirez: Okay.

[1:18:30] So the only ones that were going to school were the older three, and I was having – it was just a big – I remember it was just very difficult to even have them get that energy to wake up in the morning. I feel like they got comfortable with the fact that they were home, and they didn't have to commute anywhere or walk anywhere.

[1:18:55] And all I remember I was doing is, since we have our dog, I was like, all right, everybody get up, 7:00, we start school at 8:00. They had a little bit of time difference between the time they started. But I'm like, I want everybody up, I want everybody energized. And we would get up and we would walk with Chase. So we would walk early in the morning to kind of get their body used to waking up early, getting some energy into their bodies. Because all right, we're home, we'll all just stay here.

[1:19:29] Like, it was just like, I felt like they didn't even have the energy to even wake up or be present in their teaching. So I was like, we're all getting up, we're all walking, we're getting some fresh air, we're getting some nice sun. Let's move our bodies, let's get out of the rooms. And so that was my routine every morning. And then, like I said, we were all right here in this living room, and we had our own little workstations. So I had them all there, made sure they were all working and paying attention to what they had to do individually.

[1:20:04] They all had headphones so that they weren't all on top of each other's conversation. And I also remember that they got goofy. And I kind of remember, like, okay, you're not in class, this is not your classmate. Like, your brother's not your classmate, so please separate yourselves out. Even that was like, they just – they weren't focused. So I'm like, oh my gosh, and what am I going to do?

[1:20:29] So that was for the first few months, and then me working, and if they had a question, I had to stop what I was doing and make sure I addressed it. And then at that time, Nathan, make sure I have breakfast for them. So, like, balancing work and monitoring what they're doing, and make sure they had their meals, it was just like, oh my gosh, so chaotic.

[1:20:57] I just thought, wow, how much longer is this going to be? Like, I can't do this alone. And I just remember every day was a struggle. I was like, oh my gosh. And I felt like it was just repeat, repeat, repeat, on repeat, repeat, repeat, every day. And I'm like, I need something to do for myself. Like, I can't just – like, I'm going to burn out. That's how I felt. But that was my routine. It was just like every day. And I was just like so happy once it was over.

[1:21:28] But at the end of the day, all right, did you do your homework? Did you do this? And I gotta take care of this, and I gotta – you know, I've got to make

sure I have dinner ready, or Eddie had dinner ready. But we swapped out those things and I was like – he's like, just, you know, sometimes Eddie's just like, oh, just lay down and relax. I'm like, oh my gosh, it's just so much. Like, I was like, oh my gosh.

[1:21:54] And then on top of that, my parents, they were also – like, their whole emotions were running crazy too, because they're like, you know, we don't want to get sick. I did mention that my aunt passed away in November of 2020 from Covid. And that was even the worst scare for my parents. It was like, oh my gosh, death is so close to us, what about if we got sick? So at that point, they had already – they're like, oh, as soon as there's a vaccine, we want it.

[1:22:31] So yeah, I remember just making sure that they wanted that vaccine, that they were on that list. Because I think it was the senior citizens that went first. And I can't even remember. I think I'm jumping ahead, but I can't even remember when they got their first vaccine. But they were like, you know, don't go anywhere, don't do anything. And I'm like, well, I just want to enjoy my summer.

[1:22:55] And you know, just having those conversations, and then being – I remember that even though they said there was a curfew, and I don't know what, I was just like, I just lived as normal as possible. I remember I was going on walks every day, every evening, and I would enjoy the peacefulness of the whole city, like, I would just enjoy it so much. I was like, I can walk at 10:00 at night with no worries. And I was walking with Chase.

[1:23:28] Obviously, I didn't have a mask on. I'm like, I'm walking outside, and I want free air. You know, I want my just fresh air. And I remember people walking too, like even with their mask on. I'm like, we're outside in the fresh air, like, get some fresh air. But yeah, you definitely saw that scaring everybody, nobody wanted to walk in the same direction you were. And I think it was exaggerated social distancing.

[1:23:59] Because I'm like, all right, we're not going to do anything to each other. Like, you're walking in the opposite direction as me. But yeah, it was just so hard to get used to all that.

Riggenbach: And walking to your home from the bus stop, it's a really beautiful neighborhood.

Ramirez: It is. I'm actually surprised how nice this neighborhood is in the midst of all the craziness, because I know the next neighborhood over, I hear, like, a lot of shootings.

[1:24:30] I don't know, I feel like this area's really nice and calm. Like I said, I'm able to walk at night and nobody ever bothers me. No issues, nothing. I don't feel like

my security's at risk. I really like this area here. And I'm very comfortable with the boys walking around here and not having any issues with all the Chicago crime and everything. Very, very nice neighborhood. Laid back.

[1:25:02] I never had an issue here in this area, and I've been here now going on six years.

Riggenbach: And we're about to get to talking about the summer of 2020, but during that first part with the kids being home, how did you get your work done for you job?

[1:25:28]

Ramirez: Well, sometimes I just had to walk away and be like, I need to focus too on myself, because it was like, all right, like, the first of the day was offer them, like, hey, let's make sure you've got everything for school. I made sure they had breakfast. I made sure they were up and ready and paying attention. But my second part of my day, I was like, all right, Nathan, me and you are going upstairs. I had some books for him to color, and I was like, you do this while I do that.

[1:25:58] I actually had bought my desk early in the year, and I already had my little nook area where I was going to work and focus. So I was like, all right, I'm walking away for the next three hours. I need to focus on my work. So that's how I kind of did it. Like, I would be here – like, if I would be sitting with them for a few hours, and I'd be like, all right, you know what, you guys are asking too much questions or let's hold the questions for a little bit longer, because I need to concentrate on my work.

[1:26:29] I'd have to walk away for a little bit, even if it was two, three hours. Or maybe an hour, who knows? But I had to walk away and be like, all right, I need to fully concentrate. So as far as that, I was not neglectful of my work, and I always got the praise at work that, you know, I was taking care of all of the work needs. So I was pretty proud of that, because I was like, with all the distractions here, I was able to just sit down and focus for like two hours. And a lot of my stuff – I actually had to work sometimes late.

[1:27:04] So I was like, oh my gosh, I didn't get this taken care of or this project came in that I need to have a strict deadline. And that's how I kind of figured it out.

Riggenbach: And then moving into the summer, I imagine that was quite a relief to have them out of school.

Ramirez: Yes.

[1:27:27] So it was a relief, and then it was kind of stressful too, because that summer, the oldest one, that program was shutting down. Because I had moved him

from his traditional high school to a type of program that was like a bridge program, because he was having so much difficulty in school. He was skipping classes, and he wasn't being focused in high school. So I was like, we took the initiative, like, I'm sorry, you can't come here no more.

[1:28:04] He's like, he wasn't doing nothing. He was not going to class. Like, what are you doing? So 2020 was a godsend for me because it helped out that we had the homeschooling, and I was able to see what exactly he was doing, and then for him to have more focus and less distraction. So I just remember that right before that, it was kind of stressful, because we were kind of figuring out – his program was shutting down because of the pandemic.

[1:28:35] They didn't know if they were going to ramp up the program again or they were just going to shut down for the time being. So I had to figure out, where was I going to move him to? I was like, well, he can't go to a traditional high school because it's so many kids. He's not focused. He needs that one on one attention.

[1:28:56] Like, I like how now that he's able to do that one on one. So I switched him over to an alternative school. We were thinking, okay, let's put him in a GED program. We don't want him to take away from his learning and from him gaining an accredited diploma. We don't want to rob him of that, but he kind of put himself in this situation. So I remember I was looking everywhere, because I was like, you know what, I need to have this before school starts again, because I don't want him to go to our local high school and again start with the same thing.

[1:29:32] Cutting class and not going to class, not doing anything. So we ended up just researching a whole bunch of places. I know they had a college credit program where you kind of do your GED and then you ease into the community college. So I remember we were just – like, my husband was pushing. He's like, get him in a GED program, get him in a GED program.

[1:30:00] Like, the faster he gets it over with, the better. He'll just benefit from getting a diploma. And we're like, fine. So we actually found that place where he goes. He goes to Ombudsman. It's an alternative school. And their class setting is so much smaller, and they're able to do more one on one with the students. So this has been so much – like his whole way of looking at things has been so different.

[1:30:33] Like, he's on the honor roll now, which that was unheard of. Like, he hardly misses a day. And the class times are reduced for like about four hours, and they're able to regain some credits. And if they're able to finish a class earlier, they're able to take on more credits. So he's regaining stuff that he lost.

- [1:30:57] So right now, at this point in time, as of January 2022, he should be graduating this year, but he's taking junior courses right now. So he's a little behind, but so much more ahead than what he would have if he was in a regular high school setting. So I remember that was kind of stressful, and then at the same time, I was like, really, that these boys were done.
- [1:31:24] One of my girlfriends, she set up a little outing, and I was like, are you guys sure? Should we be traveling during this time? Is it safe? And I remember just thinking, you know, that whole deal with hardly anything of toilet paper, no Lysol, no Clorox wipes. And I was like, we need to have all this if we're going to be traveling. So I remember I told Eddie, I was like, is it okay if I go hang out with this group of friends?
- [1:31:58] And we're going to go – we went to Lake Geneva. So I'm like, it's not far, we're here, we're close, but you know, we're just going to have a little girl's night. I remember it was just like the weekend. And I'm like, I don't know how we're going to do it. I'm kind of scared. But at the same time, I was like, I just need to leave all this craziness that's going on. And he's like, yeah, go ahead, go ahead. He's like, just go have fun. Just unwind, you know?
- [1:32:26] And he was just so understanding. And I remember he stayed with the boys, and I went. So it was just like a little paradise in the midst of the craziness. It was just something that I was like, oh, I need this. Like, I need to just get away, just for a few. And I remember we are a lot into our home projects, so at that time, I wanted the – the backyard, I wanted a little patio platform. And we had a very small backyard.
- [1:32:58] And he actually took the initiative. He had the boys help him. And when I came back from that weekend getaway, the patio was ready. And I'm like, oh my gosh, it looks so beautiful. It was just so nice. And I was like, I wasn't able to do the home project with you. He said but the boys helped me, and, you know, it was a cool experience. I was like, I love it. It was perfect. I came home to a little treat. So that was perfect, because I was like, you know, since we're not going out, our backyard is our getaway from everything where we're just going to do our little powwows and have our little retreats and fun.
- [1:33:38] So I remember that was fun, having that little area for whatever we wanted, our little getaways.
- Riggenbach: That sounds wonderful. And then continuing talking about that summer, in our pre-interview, you had mentioned that you guys did a lot of stuff together that you might not have done before?
- [1:34:00]
- Ramirez: Yes, so that's why I said it was our little oasis back there, because we did bonfires, we did a lot of cookouts. We were just out there. When we felt like

we needed to do something, it was our backyard. We would go get our stuff for grilling and everything and just hang out in the backyard. It was just fun. There was just us hanging out. And we're already hanging out, but in a different way, you know?

[1:34:31] Just like a fun way. And then I remember that even things that I'm like, oh, you know, I just want to do something, what is something we can do/and I remember we went to a little pond by the airport, and my husband knows about this little area, it's like a little park. And it had like the little paddle boats. And I'm like, oh, we're doing paddle boating. Like, something we've never done before. Everybody was having fun, and we were bonding. And I was like, it was such a nice experience, to get to just everybody, you know, to their new normal and get some fun in.

[1:35:08] Just get out of the whole routine. Because it was just like the same thing over and over, like I said. It felt repetitive, and I was just, like, so ready for it to be over.

Riggenbach: And then you also mentioned that Eddie's aunt has a pool?

Ramirez: Yes, so yeah, she's out in Bolingbrook, and I remember I was like, oh my gosh.

[1:35:31] That was perfect, because it was just – you know, they were recommending less than, what, 15, 20 people? And I was like, I remember we went out there and it was just fun. You know, every summer, we try to hang out with them as much as we can, with all our busy lives. And they have a business they run. It's just, like, oh my gosh. It was perfect, you know? We got the pool experience.

[1:35:55] Because I think all the pools were closed that year. You couldn't go to the lake. And I'm like, you just need that little sun feel, like it's summer, and I'm like, what doesn't feel like a summer, like a pool? Why not, you know? And it worked out perfect because we were able to hang out with them. We always love their company, and then they're such a cool couple. And they're very generous and great hosts. So I was like, oh my gosh, I was like, I love visiting them.

[1:36:25] And it was even perfect that they had a pool. You know, who has their own pool? So it was awesome, you know? And the kids loved it. Even yesterday or today, I think, my son's like, I want to go to my tia's pool, my aunt's pool. And I'm like, it is cold right now.

Riggenbach: That's so sweet. Wow. So during that summer, Illinois moved into phase two, so things were kind of opening up.

- [1:36:57] It was a weird time, I think, because a lot of people – I think a lot of people at that point wanted the pandemic to be over. So there was a lot of tension. Like, that's when the pandemic I feel like started becoming more tense between people wanted it to be over, and people feeling like it wasn't, and some people feeling like it was, with the numbers fluctuating. What was that like for you guys?
- Ramirez: I remember I felt like in our own little world here, it was just normal.
- [1:37:30] Like, we didn't do anything like, oh my gosh, you know? I did mention I think that my – when was the phase two, then? What time period?
- Riggenbach: Summer of 2020.
- Ramirez: Summer of 2020? Okay. So yeah, it was still feeling like we had to be home, like we couldn't go out. Like, we weren't ready.
- [1:37:56] It just felt like this was our new normal. Just stay away from everybody, and that's it. That's all I felt like. Get away from everybody. Don't get close to anybody. But yeah, it was – I can't really remember. It's like a blur. The only thing I remember is obviously I said that we were going to forest preserves. We do a lot of nature walks. And we ended up going to Michigan, because you could actually get in the water in Michigan.
- [1:38:30] In Illinois, it was not allowed. I remember for Father's Day, I asked my father to take a day off, and we were all going to do a picnic day. It would have been a nice day for us to just hang out. And we found out that we couldn't even go into the pool – or not the pool, the lake, because everything was closed. And I'm like, what does the water have to do with us?
- [1:38:59] As long as we're keeping away from everybody, why can't we go in the water? Like, I didn't understand it. And I remember once the lifeguards left, the water was open. And there was nobody there. It was just us. We had a cookout, and I remember it was just like we all took days off. And we were like, let's just have a day at the lake. And it didn't feel like the best, but it was something that we got to do together.
- [1:39:26] We had our grill, we had drinks, we had the beautiful view of the lake. But every time we got close to the lake, it was like, the lifeguards would warn us, like, you can't come in the water. I was like, we're not, we're just enjoying the view. Like, it was just like so much tension around that. Like, all right, we're not going to go in the water, but we did come here and plan to have a day at the beach. So we wanted to keep that as normal as possible.
- [1:39:57] So I just remember it was – like you said, it was like tension and everybody was just so high strung on a lot of rules that you're just like, no freedom. Like, nothing. You can't do nothing. Like, you don't even enjoy going out, because

you're just reminded, hey, don't do this, hey, don't do that. So I just remember it was just like, why even go out anyways?

Riggenbach: And then I think you had also mentioned in your pre-interview that it was also July of 2020 when you lost your uncle to pancreatic cancer?

[1:40:34]

Ramirez: Yes. So yes, that whole experience of funerals was a whole different dynamic of what we're used to. You know, he passed away. It was July, and we're in the middle of this pandemic. We don't know what to expect. Definitely want to be there for the family.

[1:41:02] I just remember, I was thinking, well, it can't be a normal funeral. Like, at this point, you can't have a normal funeral, because of the social distancing, because you had to make sure everybody's keeping their mask on. And I'm like, it's so hot to have our mask on in July. But I remember that they did it as normal as possible.

[1:41:27] So they had it at a funeral home, and originally for my aunt, when she passed away in November, because I think things – there was more restrictions in November versus July 2020. They were just starting with limiting the amount of people at locations. So I think you know this, there was lines everywhere to get in places, with the supermarket, clothing stores. Everywhere there was lines.

[1:41:54] And I remember that when we went to the funeral home, it was like a limit of 50 people. And I'm like, how are we all going to be standing out here? Like, it was more than 50 people at the funeral home, trying to pay their respects to the family. And obviously you see the body and you ask for a blessing, and then you have a prayer. And I remember that I was like, his casket was open, we were able to see his body, and then we were able to – I had to express that emotion that I was sorry to my family.

[1:42:31] How do I not hug them? So everybody had their masks, we all hugged, and we expressed our condolences. And I remember it was just like, all right, well, I guess we have to leave. We have to be outside, because we need to let other people come in. So usually people are always there present with you in a time of a death, and that time, it was like, all right, only these people can be in here with you, everybody else has to be outside.

[1:43:00] It just didn't make sense to me. But, you know, you kind of understand, and you just kind of roll with the whatever's going on. Like, you have to just understand at that point, because you want to be there for that family. And yeah, so it was kind of crazy, because at his burial, they had this whole celebration.

- [1:43:27] And I'm thinking, how do you bring more people to a place where we're supposed to have a limit of people? But it's out in the open, I guess they had a whole demonstration with horses, and they made this – I have pictures. But I was like, how do you do this? I guess they were just like, you know what, this is what he deserves, and I don't care what the rules are, this is going to happen.
- [1:43:55] So I was just like, I was so weirded out. I'm like, I've never seen horses perform at a funeral.
- Riggenbach: Yeah, I was going to ask what kind of demonstrations were they?
- Ramirez: So in life, he loved what they call a charreada, which is like a rodeo. So he loved rodeos, and he loved horses, and so they paid homage with horses to him, because he loved horses.
- [1:44:24] When he lived in Mexico, he had his horses, and here, he went to Joliet or something, and he was always riding horses. So that's why I guess it just made sense to celebrate him with horses, because he loved them so much. So I remember I was weirded out. I was like, I've never seen this type of celebration for a funeral. I'm like, I understand if it's a birthday. You know, maybe he has some type of celebration with the horses, but I'm like, at his death?
- [1:44:57] But, you know, to each his own.
- Riggenbach: And then kind of moving from the summer to the fall, like you said, online school again. Were they in person at all from the start, or is it all online?
- Ramirez: No, it was all online. And they were pushing to get – no, wait, let me back up. So they did have that hybrid learning for a little bit that I said that's what I wanted to kind of continue throughout that whole year.
- [1:45:31] But they ended up only doing hybrid learning for just a few weeks, and then they said, nope, it's just going back to remote learning. And I remember, I'm like, oh, Christian's in eighth grade. His whole eighth grade experience is down the drain. Like, I remember eighth grade was so fun. Like, you got to do field trips, you got to do some kind of crazy and wacky thing for a week.
- [1:46:00] You know, they had that spirit week and all those things that you're just like, he's going to miss out on that. And he did. Like, he didn't go to a luncheon, he didn't go to those picnics that they have. Like, some kind of bonding experience with the eighth graders. None of that. So it was just so different for him that I'm like, man, he really missed out on the eighth grade experience.
- [1:46:26] But, you know, that's what we had to deal with, and we did the best we could.

Ramirez_Gab

Riggenbach: And I recall you mentioning that before the pandemic, he was really good at school.

Ramirez: Yes. So that's definitely something that I noticed early on, that he was always on top of his tests, and me and Eddie were always on top of him to, like, hey, make sure you've got everything turned in, make sure you don't have any missing assignments, make sure that you're on top of your work.

[1:47:00] And he was doing really good. Actually, his class assessment was based on that year before eighth grade, so seventh grade, and because of it, he's in honors classes now. So I'm saying he was really doing very well for himself. He was academically on top of everything that he needed to do. His scores are very high. So because of that, right before the pandemic, right now, he's in those honors classes that will help him later on in life.

[1:47:35] But yeah, he did suffer as far as he had a lot of distractions. He had a lot of times where he just didn't have the drive to even do anything. It's just his whole morale just changed from very studious to where he was very lazy. And I'm like, oh my gosh.

[1:48:01] Just something needs to be done. I was just thinking, like, he needs to go back. He is not doing well in this remote learning setting.

Riggenbach: What do you think it is about it? Do you think it's maybe that he doesn't have that praise from the teachers, like that very direct recognition perhaps?

Ramirez: I believe that and also, the teacher can't really see you through the camera or sometimes you're able to just give her the view that you want and then pretend like you're paying attention.

[1:48:35] You can hide a lot of things behind the screen, and when you're face to face, you cannot. Like, he could be whispering, or he could be on his phone and, like, excuse me, we need to be focused. And I feel like that one on one accountability just suffered a lot, because he was able to go behind the radar and be overlooked.

[1:49:01] So I feel like that he did suffer a lot from it. And he pushed the buttons a lot. Like, oh, let's see what I can get away with. Oh, that worked this time? Okay, perfect. And then sometimes he was in his room. Like what I said is, like, they were all talking amongst each other and then talking over each other. And I'm just like, all right, you stay in your room, you stay in your room. I just need you to focus.

[1:49:28] And that also made it even worse, because they're behind closed doors, I'm not seeing what they're doing, and obviously sometimes we were like, all right, you're teacher's emailing me that you're missing this, this, this, and this. And see, well, it's not going to work with you behind closed doors. Like, I

can't trust you that way. So yeah, that accountability really suffered because I feel like they just pushed the buttons to see what they could get away with.

[1:49:56] Already as a kid, you don't like school, so that made it easier to just shut down and do whatever you wanted to do.

Riggenbach: So Nathan, your youngest, he was in the virtual preschool during this time?

Ramirez: Yes, so it was very convenient. I really liked that, because they basically just assigned – they made videos. This preschool was through the high schoolers right here, our closest high school, Curie High School.

[1:50:31] And it's so cool, because the kids already from school are putting a plan for other children to learn. So they downloaded videos like, hey, something nice, like something cool. They explained what they were teaching and the activity. And I could do it all at my leisure time. Like I said, most of my morning was focused on the boys that had the remote learning.

[1:50:56] Then I focused on work. And then later on in the evening or maybe like on an hour lunch break, I'd be like, hey, let's see what we can do. So he would watch the video, and he would be like, oh, okay. And then they'd give us a printout. All we had to do was print it out. And he'd start work. And I have all those videos where we had to upload it. Like, you had to show him doing the activity. We'd upload it, and they got to grow with him for that. Like, first half of the year. And I'm like, that is so special, like, actually documenting a lot of what he's learning and how he's learning.

[1:51:31] And I was just like, that was a beautiful program. I was like, it couldn't be more accessible to me. Like, I wish he would have been able to go to the preschool, but it was perfect for me, because trying to balance out where the kids' life and making sure he had some type of distraction or some learning as well for him. That was great.

[1:51:58] Because I got to do it on my own time. And I remember he had fun, they had some dancing, they had some exercise. And we just had fun, and it was a lot of bonding with him too that I would never expect when he's in preschool, because in a preschool setting, they are away from their family and away from their moms and dads, and we got to do a lot of stuff together. So that was kind of cool. I learned about that program through our Facebook group.

[1:52:29] It's called the Westlawn Group. So basically that's what our neighborhood is called, Westlawn. And there's a lot of resources. People offer their services, like if they're selling something, or if they have some activity going, they post it on there so the community knows about it. And I remember that's how I learned about that preschool, through that Facebook group.

[1:52:56] And yeah, I was like, I'm signing up. So yeah.

Ramirez_Gab

Riggenbach: That's really wonderful. So we've kind of gotten a sense of what the school was like for all of your kids. I really don't know how you stayed sane during all of this. I think you mentioned it was in October that you started crafting?

Ramirez: Yes, so that's why I was like, oh my gosh, I need to make sure I do something for myself.

[1:53:28] Like, also give myself a chance to grow in whatever I like to do, because everything was for them, for the family. I'm like, I want something for me. So I did start crafting again. Not again, but I started crafting in October, and I learned of this program through my son's school at the time, his middle school, the middle child, my middle child.

[1:53:54] Christian. They actually sent out an email, and they said whoever's interested in crafting and the crafting will be remote, so you didn't have to go into a location again with the same thing that – you know, making sure everybody's kept healthy and safe. They said it would be from the comfort of your home, and I was like, hey, I like crafting. I'm going to respond to this. So I responded, and I was able to get enrolled.

[1:54:27] And all that's been happening, I'm still enrolled now. We go to the school, we pick up our materials, whatever we need for the new crafting week. And then we log onto – it's not Zoom, it's the Meet Me, through how the kids go to school. Like, they connect online? And then all the moms are there, and we just start talking, and how's everybody's day, and we start crafting.

[1:55:00]

Riggenbach: That's an amazing program, wow.

Ramirez: Yes, I was like, oh my gosh, I would never expect it would be – like, this challenge could be so easy. Like, I feel like you need to be present and see the person, how they're doing everything. Because it did pose a little challenge at first. You know, you're kind of like, squinting, like what is she doing? You know, it's a little hard. But once you got used to it – I love it.

[1:55:26] I love that program, and like I said, I'm enrolled in it now again this year, and I love it. Because it's just my time to shine and my little oasis too, because I like to do crafts.

Riggenbach: Is that snowball and wreath?

Ramirez: Yes, so this is this year. We did this wreath, we did this. And I like doing other stuff myself. I have some Easter crafts that I started.

[1:55:56] That heart right there with the yarn on it, that was another craft that we did this year. Yeah, and we were doing a lot of flowers, so I learned how to do – yep, this is another one.

Ramirez_Gab

Riggenbach: It's beautiful.

Ramirez: Thank you. See, it's a lot of little trinkets. But I love it, because I'm like, it decorates the home so nicely.

Riggenbach: They're really pretty.

Ramirez: Thank you.

Riggenbach: And maybe I should take some pictures so we can post them on the website.

Ramirez: Yes, you definitely could, yeah.

Riggenbach: So that the listener can see what we're talking about.

Ramirez: Yes, definitely.

[1:56:26] So yeah, that's a lot of my time occupied and like I said, it was just something for myself, and I enjoy doing crafts a lot, so I needed to do something for myself. Kind of like awakening.

Riggenbach: I'm glad you did that.

Ramirez: Yeah, thank you, I know. It was something that like, oh my gosh, with all this that I'm already – I've got on my plate, could this be something I can do and handle?

[1:56:57] But again, like I said, Eddie steps in, and he's always like, you know, okay, what do we need to do? I'll take care of this, meanwhile, you go to your class. So that was all great.

Riggenbach: Do you think the pandemic opened the door for you to start doing something like this? Do you think you would have started crafting otherwise?

Ramirez: Yes, so I think that I wouldn't have started or even had the thought to. I probably had it in my mind, but I wouldn't have taken action.

[1:57:25] But I feel like keeping my mental health and making sure that I'm not overwhelmed, or there's a little escape for me in the midst of all this chaos, I probably wouldn't have done it. I honestly feel like I would have just kept on doing what I was doing.

Riggenbach: And part of the reason we met was through Jojo Galvan Mora, who was teaching a program at UIC. Can you tell me a bit about that?

[1:57:58]

Ramirez: Yes, so again, through that Westlawn Facebook group, I learned about this program called Odisea, Odyssey. And they basically just said, you know, if

you're an adult and you want to do some extra learning or be more enriched in history or what have you, to enroll. And I was like, huh.

[1:58:26] I was like, this sounds interesting. Like, I'll try it. Like, all right, I got four other days I could kind of balance out some new activity. And I just learned a little bit about it. Like, it was two days a week, and you would join remotely. Or at that time, they were still thinking we would start going into a classroom setting. So I was like, yeah, I could do it twice a week, that's no problem. That gives me enough time to get everything situated at home and then the boys are – probably Eddie would step in and help me in for the evening.

[1:59:02] I'm like, oh, this is doable. You know, I want to get to know more people. It would be a nice experience. So yeah, so that was another thing that I learned through that Facebook group. And I was like, well, let's just give this a try, see how I like it. And yeah, definitely something new. Get to know new people and just have a conversation where I would normally not even have a conversation at work with anybody for hours.

[1:59:34] When, you know, the people I daily communicate with are just my family. And I'm like, huh, it's just some healthy conversation and just new faces. I'm like, this is great. So once we started doing that twice a week, and I was like, okay, this works out perfect. You know, my craft class is one night a week, my teachings are two times a week.

[2:00:00] And I'm like, this works out perfectly. So again, this is just like, oh, you know, something new or what did I learn this week, or what am I learning this week? And just have a conversation with different people. So I was like, you know, this is working out. I like this.

Riggenbach: And those classes were in Spanish, right?

Ramirez: Yes, so that was another – I feel like it was a challenge for me, because growing up here in Chicago, obviously my first language was Spanish, but I mostly communicate in English with my siblings, with my kids, my husband, at work.

[2:00:39] You know, I mostly talk in English. So a lot of the challenge was, my understanding of Spanish, I say is like the country or like, you know, just the very basics. My parents were not educated in Mexico as well. They were very poor, so they didn't have any high teachings or any high level degrees.

[2:01:04] And I'm like, I feel like my basic learning of Spanish is very basic, and so with these teachers, they're educated. And it was a – it still is, I feel, because sometimes I'm always asking my husband, like, can you help me translate this? And just learning how to slow down and learn new words in Spanish that I probably would have never heard of before.

[2:01:33] So imagine like – this is – oh my gosh, the language is – like, the wording and everything is totally different to me, and things that I'm not used to. I'm very used to the basics of Spanish and just understanding. And I'm having to reread stuff or record myself.

[2:01:57] Because there's not resources available to me sometimes. Like, I remember I was recording myself reading and re-hearing what I was reading, because I was like, my understanding had to be broken down into several steps for me to understand what I was reading. I'm like, it's already difficult as it is to understand some words in Spanish. And now with that, I was like, they told me if I wanted to stay in the English one – I'm like, I chose the Spanish because that location where they were going to meet was closer.

[2:02:29] And I'm like, I can't be traveling that far out at night, you know? So I chose the Spanish. And it worked out well, because there's things that I still don't understand, but the professors are very understanding, and they walk through a lot of it with you and have a lot of patience.

Riggenbach: That's wonderful.

Ramirez: So yeah, I enjoy that program a lot.

Riggenbach: Are you still enrolled in it?

Ramirez: Yes. So we just started the second semester right now.

[2:02:57] At first, it was literature and art history, and the art history – like, I've lived in Chicago my whole life, and I've never had a deep dive on the art history of Chicago. And that's what it basically was about. And I'm grateful that, because I'm like, you know, other than this class, I would have probably never looked into it or be aware of some things that Chicago art history is all about.

[2:03:28] So that was the first semester, and then this semester, we have philosophy and history again. No, history, but again, it's Chicago history. I'm like, oh, that is so cool. There's some things that I'm like, I'm learning a lot that I never even know about. Like, we were talking about boycotts and Haymarket, and I'm like, all these important events that happened here. And I'm like, and I was not aware.

[2:03:55] Like, even the Chicago Fire, when we learned it in the art class, it was like, we kind of had some idea of it, but we never did a deep dive of what happened, what downtown looked like. You know, you get the feel of just traveling to the past and actually seeing how this great big city came about. So that was awesome to me. Like, I love learning, especially where I'm from and being more well rounded on the history of the city I'm from.

[2:04:26]

Riggenbach: That's really wonderful to hear. That's really cool. Wow, I can't believe that we've had this wonderful conversation, and we haven't gotten to 2021 yet. I'll try to speed it up a bit so I don't take too much more of your time. But, you know, to continue that chronological order, the holidays of 2020, what did they look like for you guys?

[2:04:54]

Ramirez: Everybody was still scared to have gatherings and I remember my sister just – I just felt like it was overly exaggerated, but in good reason, because this whole pandemic's so unpredictable, and with a lot of deaths happening and all the people in hospitals, you just get scared for your own family.

[2:05:25]

So I just feel like, all right, I just have to understand her, she's being cautious for her family. But I was just like, in some of my way of thinking, I was just like, all right, all right, we're doing the social distancing thing, we've got our masks on, why aren't we getting together? But our holidays were via Zoom. I remember like, I can't do that with my parents. They're not technologically savvy. It's not like they're able to get on the phone or whatever and have a conversation with me while they're having dinner.

[2:06:00]

So I'm like, I'm going to their house, I don't care. So we went to their house for a little bit. And it was just us five. And it was just very nice. It feels like we're actually having a Thanksgiving dinner versus seeing you on a screen eat. So yeah, we tried to do it as normal as possible. Well, first time that we actually did this, it was six families on that Zoom meeting.

[2:06:29]

So I never seen these families before, but it was nice to have a conversation and just meet new people. And I remember that we were like, all right, what are you eating. That was just our conversation. And it felt kind of artificial like, all right, well, thanks, bye, you know? I'm done. I need to have my own dinner here, because you're not here in front of me, and it doesn't feel like you're in front of me anyways. But yeah, I remember that was our holidays.

[2:07:02]

It was Thanksgiving and Christmas the same thing. My sister's like, oh, I'm not going over there. And then she already doesn't like to go out for New Year's, but I was like, everybody was just – we were just home, and we were just in our own little secluded space.

Riggenbach: And did you say that it was around Thanksgiving when your aunt passed away from Covid?

Ramirez: Yes.

- [2:07:28] So she passed away probably two weeks before Thanksgiving, and I remember my cousin, her daughter, which she doesn't live here anymore in Chicago, she lives in Texas, she came for that period of time where she had to get the funeral arrangements and we had the rosary for nine days where we prayed for her. And I remember, everybody was eager to join for the rosary after the funeral and everything.
- [2:08:01] And for her funeral, it was very different. I don't know what changed between July and November, but there was a limit also on people. And this time, since she had Covid, I guess, when she died, they could not show her body. So I'm like, my aunt already died alone. Like, we weren't able to see here. I remember she was traveling a lot. She liked to go to Mexico a lot.
- [2:08:30] And since her husband, my uncle, had passed away in – I believe it was February 2019 – she was just – you know, trying to enjoy life as best as possible, and so she was traveling a lot to see her family in Mexico, Texas. And we weren't able to see her a lot. I always remember her house was mostly vacant.
- [2:08:57] And I was like, is she back, is she back? No. Well, then when she got back, maybe a month later, that's when she got sick. And like I said, the funeral arrangements were so different. And I just remember that when it came down to the burial, nobody was really highly sensitive about being close to each other. It was just like, we're here, we're present. I told my cousin, I was like, anything you need, you can come to our house for Thanksgiving.
- [2:09:29] And she was just like, you know, not in spirits to celebrate. And I understand, but I'm like, you guys want to have dinner. You guys are out of town, so you don't have to be going back and forth and buying stuff. But I remember she ended up not coming over, and she just said, you know, that she appreciated it, but she didn't really feel up to any type of celebration.
- [2:09:55] And I'm like, yeah, I get it. And I remember for her rosary, the first day, everybody was there, and then everybody just started dwindling the last nine days, because they just got kind of like – everything got back to earth, like, okay, we're in a pandemic, we shouldn't be in a location where there's more than eight people, ten people, and it was a really confined area. So every day, it was just like us four. Like, basically my family and just them to where – you know, hers.
- [2:10:30] And like I said, it dwindled down and dwindled down. The people didn't want to expose themselves.
- Riggenbach: I'm so sorry for your loss.

Ramirez: Thank you, I know, it was difficult. We were really close to that aunt, and she lived right next door to my parents. So imagine how she was always there, we were always hanging out with her. Yeah, it was difficult.

[2:10:56] Because I was like, no, she's getting better. She's getting better. You know, you had that optimistic that things were going to get better. Like, things turned out for the worst. So I'm like, oh my gosh, she was gone in less than a day or two after they said she was fine.

Riggenbach: I've heard about cases like that, where someone, they start to do better, or it's just... Yeah, it doesn't get better. I'm really sorry.

Ramirez: Yeah, it was crazy.

[2:11:28] And then learning more about what we learned about the Covid-19 disease, the virus, I thought about 2019, how everything that happened with Eddie, and how he was struggling with breathing and his lung capacity, and I was like, you know, obviously the public didn't know about it at that moment.

[2:11:57] But I was like, I'm pretty sure you had it, and nobody knew what was going on. Apart from him having his diabetes, I feel like – I'm like, you were struggling to breathe. And I remember that was one of the things, like, they said your lungs, and you were having some difficulty breathing. And I remember he was out of breath. Like, I just didn't know what to do. It was like, oh my gosh, what's going on. Like, I started to panic.

[2:12:27] I was like, you know – and then I thought back to how he was acting and how those symptoms came into play, and I was like, man, you probably had it, and miraculously you came out of it. But yeah. That's one of the things I reflected on a lot. And I was like, oh my gosh, we were so close to it, not knowing it. You know, the government already knew about it, but the public did not. So I was like, yeah, it was crazy.

[2:12:57] I was just, like, reflecting on that. Like, who knows if he did have it and we didn't know?

Riggenbach: Wow, yeah. And then in the middle of December is when the vaccines first became available, but it was only to the healthcare workers, and it became available to Illinois residents regardless of health concerns, whatever, age 16 and up, on April 12.

[2:13:26] I remember in our pre-interview, you talked about some of the reservations that you had about the vaccine. Do you feel comfortable talking about that? Or if you would rather not?

Ramirez: Yeah, so the only thing that I could say is that red flag for me was – it wasn't approved by the FDA. I'm like, how do you release a mass wide vaccine

without having these approvals? Like, how do you feel safe? And anybody who takes these vaccines is just a trial.

[2:14:03] Like, they're just trying to see what works and what doesn't. So those were my reservations. Like, I can't trust it if it doesn't even have some kind of guarantee. And it hasn't been out for that long. There's not testing. We're the test dummies. So that's what my reservations were, and then I was very on the fence, like, no, I don't want this.

[2:14:28] As it is right now, I hardly get my flu vaccine, because supposedly I was getting it every year, and they're like, its effectiveness on how well it works diminishes every year you get vaccinated. And I'm like, I just don't want it. I was like, I just didn't want it. But I ended up getting vaccinated because my dad and my mom are senior citizens and I don't want that to hinder their health.

[2:14:57] Whatever I have, I don't want to pass it on to them, and I don't want things to – you know, they're older, and you always get that in the back of your mind, like, you know, they're not here forever. But I don't want my health issues imposed upon them to make them either lose their lives because, you know, I could have transmitted something to them. So that's why I vaccinated.

Riggenbach: And that spring of '21, did they start moving into some type of hybrid, or was it the whole school semester of fall 2020 to spring 2021, was that all virtual?

[2:15:34]

Ramirez: It was all virtual. And I remember – so getting closer to when my eighth grader was going to graduate, it was just like, did you pass? What happened? Like, are they passing everybody? What's going on? And I was just curious, like, since he was doing so bad, I was like, man, he's going to stay on another year in eighth grade.

[2:15:56] And turns out they were passing everybody. And their whole ceremony was kind of like a driveway graduation. Get in, grab your certificate, walk across the stage, take a picture, and leave. So I'm like, he didn't get to see – like, I remember, I know I just had, like, all these back flashes, like, when I graduated. I was like, I can remember, I was getting hugs and everybody was seeing each other for the last time.

[2:16:28] And he got none of that. I was like, wow, it's a really sad graduation. They did it the best they could. They put a little ceremony. It was very pretty how they set it up. It was outdoors, but it just felt like a driveway graduation.

Riggenbach: That sounds difficult and sad compared to what might have been. But then kind of moving into fall of '21, I think I've seen that some Chicago schools were doing hybrid in the fall of '21?

[2:17:04] Or were they mostly in person? I guess this school year.

Ramirez: Yeah, this school year, they've been going to class, so present, in person, which has been a godsend, because I feel like high school for the most part, especially for my middle one, Christ, he just needs that experience, and he needs to be around people.

[2:17:33] I feel like he got maybe a sort of depression from just being secluded from everybody. I feel like he just didn't have the energy to do anything. Or he's a gamer, so he's already used to just being in his room playing video games with these virtual people.

[2:17:55] I know they're there, they do exist, because some of them are his friends, but I'm just like, get out. You know, go play basketball or go do something. Like, I remember – like, I'm always going back to my roots and how I was brought up. I'm like, I just need you to go outside. Like, it's not okay for you to be in your room 24/7. But yeah, they were going to in person learning as of fall 2021.

Riggenbach: And did your oldest – was he still doing well being in person?

[2:18:27]

Ramirez: Yes. So he, like I said, it helped out that his class setting was so much smaller, and he has that one on one with a lot of teachers. And he has ADHD, so he has a 504 plan, which means that he gets a little bit of extra time in between assignments or for a test. So that helps a lot, even more, as far as, you know, making sure he's on task.

[2:18:59]

Riggenbach: That's really good to hear. And then how is Nathan doing in kindergarten, right?

Ramirez: So, we just did a 360 for Nathan. I know I didn't want the typical public school setting for him, just because I noticed some things that he's not very well rounded because of him not being in a preschool setting where he typically coexists with other kids.

[2:19:27] So we're like, no, we're not doing public schooling. He is going to be doing – he's in a religious school.

Riggenbach: Parochial school?

Ramirez: Yeah, parochial school. So he's in a Catholic school, enrolled, and they are stronger believers of having in person learning. So amidst all this craziness, they take the precautions, they wipe down the whatever they need to wipe down.

[2:19:59] The desks, tables. There's more alert on how they enter ACT, and they have their masks on. And they keep a close watch. And I feel like he's going to benefit more from in person than having that instability of the Chicago public schools where, like, recently they had a strike for the mandates for the pandemic.

[2:20:33] And I just feel like he's doing so much better. He sometimes struggles, because it's so different of how he has an understanding of going to school, because he was basically home schooled for preschool. It's a learning gap for him.

[2:20:55] But I feel like the parochial school is a much better setting for him. I feel like the standards are so much different, just compared to me being in the public school setting and what my kids go through. It's so different.

Riggenbach: I'm glad that he's able to get that stability.

Ramirez: Yes. I think it's a learning curve for him and for myself as well.

[2:21:27] But I feel like struggle now and the benefits come later.

Riggenbach: In the summer of '21, or near autumn – I think it was either late August – I think maybe it was August 15 – is when the FDA approved the Pfizer vaccine. Did that kind of give you some peace about the vaccine then, or were you still having your reservations, even though you got it?

[2:21:55]

Ramirez: So I'm going to tell you that I didn't even know that, because I stopped watching the news probably early on in 2020, after they said kids are going to remote learning. I stopped watching the news, because it was very disturbing, and then just a lot of unpredictability between what you heard and a lot of – you know, it was just a lot of mixed I guess facts or whatever you want to call it. Mixed information.

[2:22:26] Because one TV news station said one thing, one said another, and I'm just like, I'm done. I'm done listening to the news. And then I don't know what kind of channel we had where they just had stats of Covid-19 just all across the board for all the states and, like, the death tolls. I'm like, is that all we're worried about? Like, how come they don't report the good stuff about what we're learning about Covid-19? The positive.

[2:22:57] It was just all negative, and I'm like, I don't want to pay attention. I try to be a very positive person. That's how I am. Like, I try to see the positive things. And watching the news was not something that I was like, this is not helping me. Like, just seeing. I understand the severity of this pandemic, but I don't want to be reminded of it every minute of the day.

[2:23:25] So to your point, I did not know. And, well, like I said, my viewpoint on vaccinations did change, because obviously I've been vaccinated since I was young, and it has helped me, so, again, that – like, I couldn't turn my back on it now. Like, okay, I've been vaccinated before, and it has helped me in certain situations.

[2:23:58] It has helped many people. You think about the statistics about polio and how vaccinations have benefited, and I was like, I can't turn my back on it now. I can't be like, all right, now I want to be anti-vaccine. And that's not how I see myself. I just thought at the beginning, there was no concrete information on how effective this was, and I just needed that approval for that...

Riggenbach: Time?

[2:24:31]

Ramirez: Yeah, for that time, because I was like, I can't just be like, all right, well, they say it could help, let's just try it, you know? And yeah, I was not aware. But like I said, I did vaccinated, because I felt like I didn't want to impose any health issues upon my older parents.

[2:24:55]

Riggenbach: And kind of getting into the concluding questions for the interview, I know that you said in our pre-interview that you have a very strong faith. Do you think that has helped you get through this time?

Ramirez: Definitely. I feel like even though the pandemic didn't help to be – I feel more present in the house of the Lord.

[2:25:29] I've always been a strong believer of expressing whatever emotion, even with my family. Like, I could do a prayer on my own, but also, my faith and guide my children with my teachings. I feel like that always gets me closer to God. And yes, that's helped me a lot, because you think about, you know, we were kind of pushed away from being in churches because there's no social distancing there.

[2:26:06] And I remember I got irritated at the fact that you had to go to the church, get a ticket, maybe a couple days before, to be admitted into a church. And I was like, I can watch it always from my phone. Like, we are so tech savvy. If I want to hear the word of the Lord, I can hear it on my phone. And that's what the majority of of us were doing.

[2:26:29] We were watching the mass on the TV, whatever it was. And I feel like that didn't hinder my beliefs, it just made them stronger. Like, we're going to come out of this, eventually things are going to get somewhat back in order, and

we're going to figure this out, and we're going to come out of this stronger, hopefully.

Riggenbach: Most definitely.

[2:26:54] And did your views on the pandemic change over time?

Ramirez: I want to say no, because there was a lot of contradicting information, which I still feel like it's a lot of contradiction. Like, for one, the whole thing about mask up in a restaurant, and then when you're eating, you can take off your mask.

[2:27:26] It's like, it doesn't make sense to me. Like, the virus does not stop just because you're eating. And maybe now, I feel like a little bit more secure, like if I'm able to have – like I said, we went out to eat at the restaurant, and they want to ask for your vaccination record. And I feel like, all right, well, that's an invasion of privacy, you know? And I feel like what else are they going to want?

[2:27:55] Are they going to want my credit report? Is it okay for me to eat? Like, it's just – things are just not making sense to me all the time. But you know, if I want to enjoy a meal, I will follow protocol. But, you know, that's my choice if I want to, and if I don't feel like dealing with that one day, I'll probably just make my own dinner at home. But one thing that did change is, you think about how viruses and bacterias get transferred.

[2:28:31] And I feel like this should have been years ago that it was mandated for you when you go into, let's say, a grocery store, to wear your mask and make sure that you're not – because you could go out, and I could be sick, and it doesn't matter if I sneeze on a cart. You're not going to know about it, but then when you touch it, and you get the germs inside you, I feel like that should have always been mandated.

[2:29:04] Like, when people are going out. And I hadn't gotten sick in almost two years. I just got sick this week – like, this week that, what is it, two weeks ago that – I'm just feeling better now, but I was like, you know, that helped so much. Like, wearing the mask and wiping down what areas we touched.

[2:29:26] I'm like, that should have been years ago that it should have been mandated, even for workers that work with our food. Like, you think about, they just wear a mask – I mean, they just wear gloves. Why aren't they wearing masks, because they're breathing on our food. That's one thing that I came to realize, like, yeah, that should have been in play years ago, because you think about we're always passing germs through the way we smell, we breathe.

[2:30:00] So yeah, that was one thing that did change.

Ramirez_Gab

Riggenbach: And then reflecting on the past two years, which I don't think anybody realized the pandemic would last that long, what would you say to yourself if you could go back to Gabby from 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic? Reflecting on everything you've learned, what would you tell her?

[2:30:26]

Ramirez: Don't be scared. Things always change, and this is for the best. That's what I feel.

Riggenbach: Well, those conclude my questions. Is there anything that you would like to add? Anything you would like to say?

Ramirez: No. I feel like the only thing I would like to add is that I hope this is a learning experience for the future.

[2:31:00]

And I know this won't be the last pandemic, because we've had history of other pandemics. But I feel like a lot of people get scared and for the wrong reasons, and sometimes we're misinformed. And I feel like a lot of the times, it's just us doing our research on what happened in the past, what worked, what didn't, and taking it from there.

[2:31:30]

I feel like a lot of people did a lot of those – that mass buying, and that was unnecessary. And a lot of people may have suffered some type of anxiety or fear, and I feel like that was unnecessary in some ways, because you just have to – I feel like you have to have faith and you have to, like, whatever's going to happen is going to happen.

[2:32:03]

And no matter how much buying or how much protection you think you have, God always has a plan.

Riggenbach: Well, thank you so much for sharing your perspective and for your time today.

Ramirez: Thank you.